
7-2009

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Recommended Citation

(2009) "Of Unsound Mind: A Brief Look Back at Mental Health Services in Western Kentucky," *Jackson Purchase Historical Society*. Vol. 36 : No. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/jphs/vol36/iss1/3>

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OF UNSOUND MIND
A Brief Look Back at Mental Health
Services in Western Kentucky
Cecelia Edwards, MS

The Falling Leaves

The fall leaves are turning brown
Some are turning red and yellow
And falling on the ground
Mental illness is like the above
Always whirling
Upward and downward
On the ground

This poem was written by a consumer of mental health services in 1999. It was included in a book of other poems and drawings by consumers in an effort to educate the public about mental illness.

At the time that this poem was written services for the mentally ill had progressed dramatically from the time when the mentally ill were housed in institutions and treatment options were few. Treatment for the mentally ill was often geared toward isolation of the ill in a state "asylum", incarceration with criminals, housing with handicapped people, vagrants and other

“undesirables”. In 1963 Congress enacted, under the direction of John F. Kennedy, the Mental Retardation Facilities and Community Mental Health Center Construction Act. This legislation set into motion a “bold new approach” in providing services to the mentally ill and mentally retarded.

A brief look at the “old” approach includes a review of the 1860 census from the Western State Hospital in Hopkinsville, which was the second “asylum” erected in Kentucky. The patients enumerated in this census included teachers, farmers, brick masons, a ship carpenter, a lawyer, a college student, housewives, and a child. The youngest patient/inmate was a 12 year old male and the oldest was an 84 year old female. Their common condition was “INSANE.” In the late 1800’s a person qualified to be sent to the “Western Lunatic Asylum” after being tried by a jury in circuit court and adjudged a “lunatic.” For example, the 12 year old male in the above census was sent to the asylum in 1886 after he was found to be insane due to epilepsy, which he had been subject to since birth. An article on the NAMI (National Alliance for Mental Illness) website (nami.org) provides a poignant window into the world of some

of the patients of these asylums. It describes an exhibit of some 12 suitcases found in an attic of a hospital in New York. The suitcases had been left when the patient was transferred or died. Included are biographies of the patients and what they had left behind in their suitcases. These are only a few of the efforts by many who do not want to forget what one author and physician, Albert Deutch, called in his book of the same title, The Shame of the States.

There are projects in many states that are working on saving the cemeteries around the asylums in order to have a memorial to those who suffered and died there. Western State Hospital has the "Cemetery Project", Eastern State Hospital has the "Naming the Forgotten" project. Web sites provide information, images, and legislation. The Early Gatekeepers: A Saga of Three American Institutions by A. Wynelle Deese gives a history of Eastern State Hospital from

records that were saved from being destroyed. The website <http://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/> is resource for those interested in treatment, eliminating the stigma of mental illness, and advocating for the rights of the mentally ill.

Paducah-McCracken County Mental Health Center opened in 1957 with its office in the Paducah-McCracken County Health Department at 916 Kentucky Avenue. It was established jointly by state and community action. Edna C. Glenn, Psychiatric Social Worker, a native of Lyon County, was the only full-time staff member. An article in the Sun Democrat by Don Pepper on November 15, 1959 gives an account of the next phase of shedding the light on the issue of mental illness. He writes "After two years of being 'crammed' into the Health Center building the center will be moved to a suite of rooms given to the group by George W. Katterjohn rent free." The Katterjohn Building was the former Illinois Central Hospital Building and as such was associated in the community with "healing." At that time the Paducah Women's Club "adopted mental health" as a community project and began to campaign to equip the center and provide a fuller program.

It became increasingly clear that reforms were needed as concerns about the treatment of the mentally ill grew. The Community Mental Health Construction Act of 1963 followed by the The Community Mental Health Construction Act

Amendment of 1965 provided the means to develop the reforms. As early as 1962-63 Kentucky mental health associations were making surveys in an effort to assess the need for mental health services. An article in the Paducah Sun reported in 1963 that Kentucky had received a federal grant to study the problems in mental health. Dr. H. L. McPheeters, state mental health commissioner, stated that finding solutions to the problems in mental health could reduce the number of patients in hospitals by 50 percent over the next 20 years.

In 1965 the Purchase Region took a step forward by beginning the formation of the Regional concept and consolidating all resources. By 1966, in consultation with the Kentucky Department of Mental Health a regional board was formed. Their responsibilities were to develop operational procedures, policies, establish project objectives and goals, expand mental health services staffing, community education, and secure the funds to support these goals. The first regional board meeting was held January 27, 1966. In August the first staff was employed and given instructions to submit a staffing grant for the region. The staffing grant proposal received official approval from the government to be

effective July 1, 1967. This was the first time that local, state, and federal funds were combined to deliver mental health services in the region. Today Region I in the form of Four Rivers Behavioral Health continues to serve the mental health needs of the nine counties in western Kentucky, McCracken, Graves, Calloway, Marshall, Hickman, Fulton, Livingston, Ballard, and Carlisle. There have been numerous additions and changes in the system over the years. The Four Rivers Behavioral Health website gives a timeline of the major changes that have occurred. It identifies past board members as well as major legislation that has impacted the lives of those suffering from mental illness. It is believed that these efforts have made a difference and has brought to an end the stigma and isolation that once made the diagnosis of "unsound mind" a doorway to oblivion.

Resources:

Growing Pains, TR Traveler's, 1999

Website,

<http://westernkyhistory.org/christian/wsh/patients.html>

Scrapbook archives of Four Rivers
Behavioral Health

Website, <http://www.4rbh.org/>

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